Journal of Popular Music Studies, Volume 23, Issue 1, Pages 19–39

Michael Jackson's Kingdom: Music, Race, and the Sound of the Mainstream

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Using the grandiose title "King of Pop" to describe Michael Jackson's impact on the past forty years of popular culture is quite possibly an understatement. The litany of statistics never seems to grow less staggering: *Thriller* as the largest selling album in the history of the recording industry, *Guinness World Records* recognition as the "Most Successful Entertainer of All Time" ("Bio"), and levels of unquantifiable stardom critics claim was previously the sole territory of Elvis (Werner 272). And there is hardly a contemporary megastar who does not count him among their influences. But what exactly is the musical monarchy over which Jackson reigns? What is this "pop" that artists such as Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, and Beyoncé claim to emulate? As numerous radio and television stations replayed Jackson's vast tome in the wake of his death, I realized that Jackson's work sounds both unique and wholly familiar. Resonating with styles such as disco, R&B, and even New Wave, his music incorporates and exceeds these genre demarcations. And Jackson is somehow King of all and none.[1]

What exactly is *pop*? The general musicological conception of popular music is as a secular, accessible, "light" body of music enjoyed by a large portion of a given population (Grout and Palisca; Kerman; Manuel; Peñín; Sadie). The music is often enhanced by a *star system*, in which an artist's popularity and success is determined by not only sound but elements such as their personality, private life, or fashion (Manuel 3). Scholars typically distinguish popular music from more elite genres such as the Western classical tradition, as well as from supposedly less commercial folk traditions. For example, in "Música popular de masas, de medios, urbana o mesomúsica venezolana," José Peñín divides music into the categories of "cultured," folk, and popular but claims, "En realidad, el término popular es ambiguo, quiere decir tanto, que a la postre nos dice poco" [In reality, the term popular is ambiguous, wanting to say so much, that by the end it tells us little] (62). If we take the term *popular* at face value, as literally

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what appears on the Top 40 charts, today's young stars would clearly only be idolizing a business model rather than a sound.

But we know that there is something about Jackson's masterful sound that has permeated the world's ears for decades. Reducing this sonic domain to simply what sells provides little indication of what popular artists are actually creating. Like other key figures such as Madonna and—also royally named—Prince and (Sir) Elton John, Jackson was key in establishing a musical category that was simply *pop*: a late 1970s originated amalgam of rock, funk, disco, and R&B. Jackson pulled from these genres but did not perform one in particular; he borrowed from them all and mixed them into his own unique musical base. In this article, I use Jackson's music as a means to explore the sonic and racial implications of defining pop as its own genre. After detailing the central importance of race in marking the consumption of sound in the popular music industry, I contrast Jackson's hybrid musical life with his strategic use of monoracial acoustic markers. Ultimately, as I show, pop and "the mainstream" Jackson helped establish are based not on a specific sonic or racial category but on the tension between realizing and transcending race through sound.

Defining Pop and the Mainstream

Despite the long history of cross-racial and interracial musical practice in the United States, the popular music industry has from its beginning been divided into racialized genres and executives have capitalized on perceptions of racial difference in marketing artists (Miller). From the early twentieth-century distinction of black "race records" from white "hillbilly records" to the current divisions between, supposedly, white rock, black hip-hop, and, more-or-less, brown world music, race has been the central organizing category for how popular music is cultivated, sold, and consumed. It would be simplistic to suggest that greedy music executives solely fabricated this racially segregated economy. More accurately, industry officials capitalized on extant racial divisions and tensions as a means to brand artistic production. And black artists, for example, also seized these musical demarcations as a way to positively differentiate and promote African American practices as distinct from the white-dominated mainstream (Radano). Thus, once these divisions were given new economic, social, and political meaning, parties from every racial background performatively constructed and reconstructed the racial divisions as they remain today.[2]

As the industry solidified, so did sonic distinctions of race. As Lisa Gitelman argues, the early days of recording provided a temporary moment of disruption between sound and racialized bodies (120, 134–37). The first recordings of black musicians in the United States, for example, actually "sounded more 'Irish' than 'black'" (Radano 5). This "colorblind" moment was soon gone, however, as music executives employed visual markers and advertising campaigns to make the races of performers known to listeners (Moon 42). In some instances, the same sonic material was at times marketed to different audiences under alternate race-based descriptions. For example, Narciso Martínez's record label not only sold his mid-twentieth century conjunto recordings to Chicano listeners under his given name, but also to Polish audiences as performed by the "Polski Kwartet" and to Cajun music aficionados as performed by "Louisiana Pete" (Appell and Hemphill 197). In all, the music industry has been in a prolonged struggle to define sound aptly through racial labels to increase sales. And these efforts have resulted in particular styles of vocalization, formal properties, and instruments being linked to specific racialized categories, despite their interracial beginnings.[3]

The exact definition of these genres, however, has not always been clear. As Reebee Garofalo explains, in the first moment of widespread nonblack consumption of race records in the 1940s, "the conventional marketing strategies of the music industry were based on three product categories: pop for the mainstream audience, country and western for the regional audience, and rhythm and blues for the black audience" (277). Yet while the pop category persisted, African American music was variously called "sepia," "ebony," "rhythm and blues," "soul," and even, briefly, "black" in an ongoing quest to label its content and targeted audience (276–78). These labels shifted between defining the race of the musician and the nature of the sound, indicating a confusion as to exactly how to pin down the music. But what remained important was the racialized distinction of genres.

At the same time, the industry has also been largely fueled by the transgression of these musico-racial boundaries. As the minstrel tradition, Elvis's reign, and more contemporary popular fascination with white rappers and black rockers evidence, the juxtaposition of racialized bodies with unexpected sounds generates excitement and intrigue—elements industry executives have used to sell their product. Of course, the crossing of racial lines has not been an equally simple task for all pop artists. As Garofalo details,

> On those rare occasions when a recording became popular in more than one market, it was said to "crossover." While the term can be used to indicate simply the simultaneous appearance on more than one chart, its most common usage in popular music history connotes movement from margin to mainstream. For a rhythm and blues release to become a pop hit, it had to "crossover" from the rhythm and blues charts to the pop charts, which is to say, it had to first sell well in the black community. This is the essence of the concept of crossover; by and large African American artists must first demonstrate success in the black market before gaining access to the mainstream. It is a process which holds black artists to a higher standard of performance than white and it is only recently that it has been successfully circumvented in any systematic way. (277)

Whether in the case of crossover artists or not, the fixed racial taxonomy of the industry grew to exist—in large part but not exclusively—in order to be traversed by performers or consumers. Even now, the industry thrives in particular on the commodified cross-racial encounter, exploiting dominant listeners' interest in how the subaltern plays and sings.

All of this categorization, as well as the crossover concept, present "the mainstream" as a de facto white genre. The extant body of scholarship on black popular music is a prime example of this tendency. While a number of contemporary studies have done much to construct a more complex, nuanced vision of black music, they fall short in doing the same for the mainstream against which black music is defined (Boyd; Garofalo; Neal, *What the Music Said* and *Soul Babies*). The mainstream is generally understood as what black or other racially/ethnically marked genres are not. The unspoken assumption here is that the mainstream is white, but this clearly presents a very limited picture. In the early twentieth century, racially defining African American and other non-European styles was a means to distinguish them from the European art music that was popular with white audiences of the time. Soon, however, African American ragtime, blues, and jazz exploded in national and international popularity, eclipsing other racially defined genres in sales to all races. Despite the increasing presence of African American material in wide national consumption, though, the notion remained of "the mainstream" as a category separate from music of color.

But as the field of whiteness studies has illuminated, the power of whiteness is its ability to go unmarked, thus eclipsing and even consuming

everything else, where it is "not seen as whiteness, but as normal" (Dyer 10). Probing into the exact composition of the, supposedly, white mainstream reveals a more intricate structure of power and racial negotiation. In reality, the mainstream features industry producers that are largely white but artists that are, generally, black and white, and listeners that are entirely mixed. Since ragtime and then jazz began to circulate the globe, African American music has been central to the music industry, so much so that Steven Feld claims that "American popular music" is more or less "a euphemism for Afro-American popular musics" (31). At the same time, the journey to mainstream success for black artists has often meant concessions either in the form of sonic and visual "whitening" or the need to adhere more closely to stereotyped black images. These two narratives of moving into the mainstream are sonic equivalents of racial assimilation and segregation. Yet we know that African American music itself has long been a product of African and European cultural material, black and white musico-racial features, and elements from other racial/cultural groups.

Instead of labeling the mainstream as black or white, Deborah Wong moves to describe it as "a phantasmatic late capitalist framework that effectively defines and maintains an Elsewhere much as race records did during the first half of this century. It is the marked category against which—through which—[in her case] Asian American indies and performers define themselves" (253). Building on this formulation, I suggest we shift from defining the mainstream as simply "not Elsewhere" but rather as a marked "Here," a space in which images and material from various Elsewheres come into dialogue. I propose the contemporary mainstream as an arena of racial confrontation and negotiation rather than the terrain of a singular musico-racial category. In reality, it is less a "stream" than a zone, a discursive no man's land between categories that relies on those very categories for its makeup.

This conception demarcates the mainstream as based on aesthetic criteria—as they express race and culture—rather than economic practices or impact. Of course, much as Wong indicates, these elements are linked. But highlighting the popular realm as a sonic environment emphasizes the ways in which most listeners approach mainstream artists—not as shrewd businesspeople but acoustic artists who trade in concept and style. Even more, the notion of dueling Elsewheres troubles the existence of a monolithic sonic Other. I believe this not only paints the mainstream as built from variegated cultural material but also opens a space to consider the distinct mechanisms of racial difference it harbors: the transracial and hyperracial.

Jackson's music is a perfect indication of how these two varieties of racial performance operate, often in tandem.

Michael Jackson as Hyper/Transracial Artist

The two-sided coin of hyperraciality and transraciality provides a useful model for discussing contemporary identity formations, particularly for people of color. *Hyperracial* indicates an overt and possibly stereotyped marking of race, whereas *transracial* is the traversing or dissolving of racial categories. The popular music industry holds both of these elements in its operations: the guiding hand of racial categorization and the potential that, with the right combination of money, talent, or desire, these bounds might be crossed. A term like *hybridity* allows us to counter notions of racial authenticity by attuning us to a wider circle of practices or affiliations someone of a given racial group may have. But what often goes undertheorized or completely untheorized is the interplay of authenticity and inauthenticity—stereotype and reality—in a world in which racial constructions engender material effects.

Jackson's life in the public eye is a prime example of the hyper/transracial dynamic. Within popular media, there has been a sharply attuned awareness of his racial status and at least the possibility of its transformation. Internet sites chart the lightening of his skin and reshaping of his facial features through plastic surgery. Debates have raged over the verity of his claims of suffering from vitiligo, a skin disease that causes the loss of pigment. And more recently, rumors abound alleging Jackson was not the father of his supposedly white children. These cases reveal a fixation on race as biologically based and an integral component of how Jackson's public persona is to be engaged. At the same time, this discourse suggests that there is the potential for racial change via changing the body. Thus, the conversations surrounding Jackson's racial identity present static understandings of race alongside questions of where exactly his body falls into or can move around within a phenotype-based taxonomy.

Of course, racial change does not mean the destruction of the larger racial system. And, despite the discursive potential for racial transformation, Jackson's shift from black child star to white media icon could never be fully complete. Discussing what he calls "colonial mimicry," Homi Bhabha details how the colonial subject can deftly imitate the colonizer and yet, because of racial disparity, never fully inhabit the same social position (86). Jackson's perceived push toward whiteness was similarly impossible;

the fascination was always for a black man who wanted to be white. The popular culture industry—and in this I include consumers—must continually manufacture difference and transgression through a repetitive process of hyperracial awareness, the positing of transraciality, and the disavowal of this prospect. During Jackson's forty-five-year career, this process cycled, recycled, and continues to cycle through public discourse. Bhabha also claims that mimicry on the part of the colonized provides a space for sociopolitical resistance, calling out the careful construction of colonial discourse on false notions of dominant racial purity (86). Jackson's case similarly suggests the limitations of gestures that preserve racial categories rather than deconstructing them, and his popularly presumed discomfort in his own body—and thus desire to become white—mitigates what might be seen as a more radical desire for racial dissolution.

His music, however, suggests the potential for racial transcendence in the realm of popular culture as it crisscrosses through various racialized genres. Jackson's musical biography displays the hidden interracial roots of pop, as well as the vast knowledge many contemporary performers have of a variety of popular and folk musical traditions. For example, his career supposedly began not when joining his brothers in the Jackson 5, but when singing the Rodgers and Hammerstein classic "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" from *The Sound of Music* at an elementary school talent show. This event is mythologized as the impetus for his father adding him to the family band, which soon became one of the most popular acts on black-owned Motown Records. Although Motown was important as a musical and economic setting created by blacks for blacks, its consumer base was largely white (Neal, "Sold Out" 117). What is unclear about this "crossover," however, is how to account for the broader nonblack audience of color that also would have encountered the Jackson 5 once they entered into the phantasmatic—and not white—mainstream. Jackson left Motown in the mid-1970s and, as he transitioned into a solo career, continued to court a multiracial and international roster of fans. In fact, as Garofalo explains, it was his success internationally that precipitated his epic rise to fame in the United States and paved the way for other black artists such as Lionel Richie, Prince, Diana Ross, Tina Turner, and Whitney Houston (286).

It was with these and other artists that Jackson crafted a new mainstream pop sound. Prior to the late 1970s, singular styles would move into the mainstream—such as swing and rock—often sustaining alterations in their sonic, racial, or cultural makeup as they did so. But with the emergence of artists like Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Prince, and Jackson's

sister Janet, the public began to catch a glimpse of the culmination of decades of cross-racial popular music consumption. These artists all pulled from a variety of musical practices that were, according to the industry's racial taxonomy, both black and white.[4] For his part, Jackson's songs frequently blended African American traditions such as gospel ("Will You Be There"), funk (evident in the repetitive bass grooves of "Billie Jean" and "Thriller"), R&B (ballads such as "You Are Not Alone"), hip-hop ("Jam"), and his vocal exclamations came straight out of a tradition of soul singers. His music also contained stylistic resonances with several genres dominantly racialized as white, most notably rock ("Beat It" and "Dirty Diana"), New Wave, and techno in his use of synthesizers, especially string and horn samples, and sequencing as a compositional tool.[5]

In reality, when he supposedly integrated MTV in 1982, Jackson did not racially cross over but redefined what the mainstream was: a space in which an interracial and intercultural musical past gets filtered through a hyperracial frame. After all, the 1980s and early 1990s industry remained a segregated amalgamation of rock, newly emerging grunge rock, R&B, and hip-hop. While black and white artists both held space in popular discourse, their output remained segregated on different radio stations, music television programs, and sales charts. In fact, to defend why they were not playing more black artists in their early rotations, MTV executives used the semantic distinction between rock and R&B as justification, indicating the still strongly held racialization of these genres (Garofalo 280). By the time Jackson ascended to the height of stardom in this era, he had—along with producers such as Quincy Jones and Bill Botrell—shrewdly perfected a sound that consisted of the transracial base that was his musical heritage punctuated by carefully wielded hyperracial sounds such as hard rock guitar and rap vocals. Ultimately, however, while Jackson pointed the way to moving past rigid musico-racial categories, the manner in which he incorporated these sounds inadvertently made it difficult for this space to be genuinely realized.

A Dirty Duet

A music lover and cultural innovator, it is no surprise that Jackson was acquainted with the musical fads of his time. But he also knew well how to capitalize on them in order to make his music appeal to increasingly greater segments of the population. As Craig Werner suggests, "The unprecedented popularity of his videos complemented a musical

strategy crafted to increase the white rock audience that heard *Off the Wall* as near-disco" (273). To bridge this gap—and likely personal affinity, as well—Jackson released several singles making prominent use of electric guitar, most notably in "Beat It," "Dirty Diana," and "Black or White." And he enlisted the help of some of the biggest hard rock guitarists of the time to play on them, including Eddie Van Halen and Slash from Guns N' Roses, capitalizing on their already established image and audiences. I will return to "Black or White" in a bit, but here wish to discuss the particular representational strategies Jackson employs in the former two songs.

Jackson won two Grammy Awards for "Beat It," and the song was instrumental in making his 1982 *Thriller* a success. The song opens with what sounds like several gong strikes and the start of an urgent but subtle drumbeat. Van Halen's now classic guitar riff—with just the right balance of syncopation and straight hits—provides the first melodic content, clearly establishing a claim over the sonic space of the track. Another guitar enters (not Van Halen) and plays a simpler counterpoint to the main riff. As Jackson enters singing the first verse, the guitars form an accompaniment woven of interlocking patterns, including a persistent rhythm guitar part supported by several synthesizers. Jackson moves to the chorus and Van Halen's riff returns, a rhythmic counterpart to Jackson's alternation between percussive vocals and sustained notes. In place of a sung bridge, Van Halen launches into a guitar solo that is a classic example of heavy metal "shredding," employing distortion, high squealed notes, intensive scale runs and tremolos, and strategically placed glissandi. In all, the incursion of the electric guitar gave a harder edge to Jackson's funky pop sound. And it was successful in getting the track played on white rock stations, although some listeners called to complain about the broadcast of "black" music (Day and Martens).

"Dirty Diana" (1988) presents a simpler incorporation of electric guitar in its tale of an obsessive fan's sexual desires. The song opens with a gong sound reminiscent of "Beat It," followed by the sound of digitally processed wind. A crowd screams, and we get the sense that we are at a live performance with Diana lurking nearby. The main accompaniment begins: a slow bassline and spare drum track with a subtly nagging ride pattern. On top, Jackson sings a few vocable ad-libs, the guitar matching his mood and sparseness. As he moves into the opening verse, Jackson grows more passionate and begins to sing louder and with more abandon. The guitar plays angular rhythmic patterns that build in time with Jackson.

The chorus erupts with Jackson and guitar singing/playing the melody an octave apart, although the distortion on the guitar makes it seem slightly off from the vocals. In all, the guitar is not all that adventurous, merely mirroring Jackson's voice; the instrument is present more for its timbre than any melodic or harmonic additions.

In both songs, the guitar is a singular voice against a more generalized backing texture. The instrument is exploited for its unique sonic properties and pushed to the extreme in an almost overdramatic illustration of the genre it represents. This gesture establishes a unique audio profile for the songs as distinct from Jackson's standard transracial pop sound. And, in the case of "Dirty Diana," the guitar provides a rock "sheen" to a song that—because of the minimal integration of the instrument—could be rendered cohesively without it. The visual components associated with the song tell a similar tale. Van Halen does not appear in the music video for "Beat It," further emphasizing the extreme focus on the timbre of the electric guitar and, perhaps, rock listeners' extant elision of his instrument, technique, and persona. "Dirty Diana," however, does feature two guitar players on stage with Jackson. These musicians—one male and the other female—are dressed in the tight leather pants and massive hairdos associated with rock and metal bands. Jackson apes their style, wearing tight pants adorned with excessive metal hardware and a curly mullet only slightly smaller than the guitarists'. All three figures do a fair amount of head banging to accentuate their musical exhortations.

But despite the ability of Jackson and guests to dialogue, the racial transgression is temporary. Boundaries are supposedly blurred as Jackson performs whiteness and the rock artists groove with black soul. The excessive marking of this genre as an addition to the songs, however, draws attention away from the rock already inherent in Jackson's sound, suggesting that it is in need of outside supplementation. It is interesting to contrast these early uses of electric guitar to the way Jackson planned to incorporate it into his *This Is It* tour (2009). In the documentary detailing this concert's production process, the tour's guitarist—young Australian appears quite frequently. She plays on many of the songs, sometimes as a lead voice, other times in the supporting ensemble. But, most importantly, she is just part of the band: visually present like the rest of the group and stepping into the spotlight when needed. Jackson highlights her playing in a key moment during "Black or White," in which she is to play a dramatic unaccompanied solo. In one moment, he coaches her on this solo, vocally illustrating examples of the types of contours he would like her to play. Orianthi attempts to match

his example but is a bit too timid and unable to fully let loose. Jackson's knowledge of rock conventions becomes clear as he tries to coax a convincing solo from her, relying on the rock image she embodies but also actively crafting it.

Yet two decades before, in an era in which the mainstream was more racially segregated, Jackson donned the physical and acoustic clothes of white rock artists in "Beat It" and "Dirty Diana." He could not legitimately *be* rock to a consumer base and thus had to find other (white) artists who could, preserving the black/white musical dichotomy.[6] While Van Halen forged new territory in "Beat It"—but remained a sound without a face—the "Dirty Diana" guitar simply sat there, functioning primarily as a timbral indication of White Rock. This fact is all the more ironic given the reality of rock as a fundamentally African American tradition, despite its racial coding as white. Jackson's transracial pop sound—and his later *This Is It* presentation of rock expertise—reflects this history, but it is overshadowed by the hyperracial whiteness of rock in all its in/authentic theatricality.

Jamming with Blackness

With slightly different dynamics, Jackson also called on the representational power of hip-hop in several songs, including "This Time Around" and "Unbreakable" with the Notorious B.I.G. (the later one posthumously), "Serious Effect" with LL Cool J, "2 Bad" with Shaquille O'Neal, "Jam" with Heavy D, and a remix of "You Rock My World" featuring Jay-Z. While there may be a desire to read these collaborations as a "natural" exchange between black artists, his choice of guests again showcased a keen sense for enlisting the genre's hottest voices. Jackson also chose artists strategically for each project, selecting, for example, Biggie to rap about "gun-totin" and "indo smoke" in the paranoid antiestablishment "This Time Around" and having LL Cool J rap about the dangerously seductive object of affection in "Serious Effect."

Already a mainstream success, interracially palatable Heavy D performs on the feel-good "Jam" (1992). The song opens with the sound of breaking glass followed by a beat rife with heavy kick drum, turntable scratches, and synthesized string hits—clear indicators of an attempt at evoking a hip-hop aesthetic. Several overlapping effect-laden voices repeat "jam" and "you wanna get up," which Jackson begins to punctuate with percussive exhalations. He starts to sing a verse that calls for nations to

come together to face common problems, ultimately saying "we must live each day like it's the last / go with it / go with it / jam / it ain't too much stuff." Heavy D comes in for a rap interlude in the bridge section and, much like traditional MC cameos, hypes Jackson as "The Man" and says little else that relates to the rest of the song's lyrics. After this moment, Jackson returns to the chorus and D enters one last time repeating nine times "it ain't too hard for me to jam."

The music video pairs these lyrics with scenes of urban decay. After an animated opening in which the letters J, A, and M are "spray painted" in the frame, à la graffiti, the camera pans through empty lots full of trash and burning tires, catches a boy using an old easy chair as a makeshift trampoline, and finds Jackson dancing (to a ghetto blaster) in an abandoned warehouse/dance studio. Amidst this environment, the video focuses on a variety of images of black boys and men; groups of young men with no shirts play basketball and break-dance, for example. But the hyperperformance of black masculinity comes from the appearance of Michael Jordan, who ends up shooting hoops and trading dance moves with Jackson. To round out the cast, D appears during his interlude, as do preteen hip-hop duo Kriss Kross, who silently dance around D and later with Jackson. There is a lone shot of girls playing Double Dutch, as well as several inactive semi-close-up shots of a young woman. But the majority of the video clearly indexes black urban masculinity.

What is striking in the song and video are the ways in which Jackson is set apart from the other black men. On the verses, his vocal style differs from his standard lilting falsetto peppered with staccato interjections. He instead speak-sings in a harsh but hushed tone, sounding more like a stream of prose than poetic lyrics. This style moves Jackson's vocals closer to rap but not quite; he still organizes his voice around melodic pitches, although he sings long strings of words on a single note and within a minimal range. But his vocalizations register even more as an approximation of MCing when heard in contrast to Heavy D's buoyant interlude, in which he emphasizes the rhythm of words rather than vocal pitch. Jackson's incomplete approach toward the particular brand of black masculinity that surrounds him also occurs when he silently apes the somewhat stereotypical wide-stance, rounded arm posture, and "pimp walk" of a hip-hop artist. These gestures greatly differ from his usual movement vocabulary, showing in an almost minstrel fashion the *putting on* of hyperracial gestures.

Jackson's blackness and masculinity are ultimately presented as insufficient and/or inauthentic in the ways in which he is paired with Jordan in the music video. In the 1990s, Jordan himself exploded as a superstar, transracial in his global appeal. Yet he also presented the hyperracial big, black athlete stereotype, thus fitting into rather than contesting the limited roles for black men in mainstream popular culture. Like the inclusion of hip-hop musicians, Jordan's appearance provides the video with "street cred," particularly due to the resonances of basketball as a black, urban sport. Jackson is depicted as lacking in the elements Jordan provides in abundance. In a number of scenes, he struggles to keep up while playing ball with Jordan, unable, for example, to intercept the ball Jordan dribbles and tries to keep from him. Rather than putting himself out too much, Jackson playfully jumps on Jordan's back and crawls between his legs. Only with the aid of a ladder is he finally able to make a basket. Jackson fares slightly better when, in very brief shots, he is able to hold his own in a group of young black men playing ball. But in two shots in which we clearly see him make baskets—once by kicking it backwards with his foot—they are the result of camera tricks, suggesting he requires "magic" in order to rival the marvel that is Jordan. Black and in blackface—through his mimicry of the hip-hop artists and ballplayers—Jackson must employ others to make up for his racial deficiency.

Despite the racial dynamics of this video, and his shifting phenotype, Jackson never disavowed his blackness. He continued to present himself rhetorically as a black man in his music and other projects, most notably in "Black or White," which I discuss below. In a number of videos, he played opposite black women as love interests, for example, and he starred in the movie version of the musical *The Wiz* (1978), an Afro adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. In all, he neither assimilated into the mainstream by letting go of his blackness nor segregated his practice to a monoracial niche market. Yet the popular conception of Jackson was that he was perpetually acting out a desire to be something other than black or, never quite successfully, white. Considering this discourse, "Jam" posed his blackness as weak or aberrant, outside of the "natural" progression from jazz to funk to the hyperracial male blackness of hip-hop. Heavy D's skin tone is arguably close to Jackson's light hue; but in sound and demeanor, they could not be further apart.

As in his duets with rock in "Beat It" and "Dirty Diana," Jackson and Black Hip-hop were in dialogue: he taught Jordan some of his signature choreography, for example. But Jordan struggled with this nonathletic form of movement, looking large and awkward as Jackson broke down

the steps and even pushed his tennis shoe (Air Jordan?) clad feet into the correct positions. The two figures and their respective varieties of blackness temporarily visited each other's worlds, but there was no grand coming together under an umbrella of heterogeneity. The possibility of representing Jackson's musico-racial hybridity was thus negated, for "black" music simply could not hold his Otherness. Ultimately, what was clearly an attempt by Jackson to connect with the contemporary musical blackness of hip-hop resulted in a separation.

Beyond Humanity

If Jackson's musical base was devoid of both hyperracial sonic whiteness and blackness, electric guitar and rap combined should make it whole again. In "Black or White" (1991), he did just this, hyperracially connoting a tale of transracial humanity. In the opening two verses of the song, Jackson unfolds a first-person narrative in which he denounces racism and promotes interracial relationships:[7] "I took my baby on a Saturday bang / But is that girl with you? Yes we're one and the same / Now I believe in miracles and a miracle has happened tonight." Taking his girlfriend out on a date, Jackson is questioned as to whether she is "with" him by a passerby. The framing of this question—if she is rightfully in his possession—recalls the historical trope of the white female as victim of black male sexuality, a narrative used to justify lynching and other racist acts. In response, Jackson proclaims they are "one and the same," a universalist "miracle" that effectually denounces both the racism and misogyny in the stranger's statement. He then turns the spotlight on his own identity, singing, "They print my message in the *Saturday Sun* / I had to tell them I ain't second to none / And I told about equality / And it's true, either you're wrong or you're right." In a moment of racial pride, Jackson tells the papers he is equal to the rest of humanity and that the verity of this fact is indisputable. Both verses are punctuated by the exhortation of the title, ultimately ending with him claiming, "If you're thinking of being my brother / It don't matter if you're black or white."

Musically, the song opens with an exuberant solo guitar fanfare followed by its signature electric guitar riff, punctuated by Jackson's vocal exclamations of "ow!" and a sample of what appears to be a sexy lion growl. The guitar line repeats numerous times and provides the primary melodic and harmonic content of the song, supported by a bouncy bassline and percussion tracks. The riff remains an almost constant presence, except

in the bridge section that features a different guitar solo and the hip-hop interlude that follows. In this segment, a voice that is not Jackson's raps about how race provides a rallying point for "gangs, clubs, and nations" but also strains human interactions. Ultimately, the MC claims racism has made "the bright get duller / I'm not gonna spend my life being a color." Here, the accompaniment drops down to percussion supported by a subtler and primarily rhythm guitar part, a sparser texture akin to a late 1980s or early 1990s hip-hop sound.

The music video for "Black or White" even more explicitly trumpets a celebratory multiculturalism. Jackson spends the first two verses of the song dropping into various groups of ethnic dancers and joining in an Epcot Center-esque dance jam. Wearing a nondescript black-and-white costume, Jackson becomes an Everyman for the late twentieth century—a global citizen equally at home cavorting on a soundstage with ornately attired Thai women, in an anachronistic Native-American celebration, at a busy metropolitan traffic intersection with a lone classical Indian performer, and in the bush with generic African tribesmen. After wrapping up a snow-covered romp with a Russian male folk troupe, the video cuts to a shot of two babies, one black and one white, sitting on a model of the earth and playing with a snow globe that supposedly contains Jackson and the Russian dancers.

This idyllic scene of interracial/cultural celebration is soon interrupted, however, with an abrupt shift to flames, images of war, and burning crosses. Highlighting the violent intrusions that rallying behind racial and other difference can promote in our lives, the narrative turns into a discussion of frustration. In a dramatic bridge section, Jackson sings,

I am tired of this devil

I am tired of this stuff

I am tired of this business

So when the going gets rough

I ain't scared of your brother

I ain't scared of no sheets

I ain't scared of nobody

Girl when the going gets mean

Jackson denounces the legacy of intolerance and racial violence in an exasperated tone. This long-standing vexation, though, gives him the strength to say that he is no longer afraid of tactics of racial intimidation such those used by as the Ku Klux Klan. Later, he even criticizes closet racists, saying, "Don't tell me you agree with me / When I saw you kicking dirt in my eye," a poetic cut at knee-jerk antiracism. It is important to note that Jackson rhetorically places himself in contrast to these tactics of violence and intimidation. While popular discourse may have questioned his racial authenticity, he speaks from a position of the disenfranchised rather than an elite, easy-to-promote-diversity perspective.

Jackson and producers use the two defining sounds of white and black music in the 1990s—rock guitar and rap—to sonically support the song's message of racial coexistence.[8] Even more, for the first time, we see and hear the transracial instead of merely temporary racial transgression. Before the song proper, a different guitar riff appears in a spoken scene in which a boy's father yells at him to turn his music (the guitar) down. This guitar part is performed by Slash, the mixed black-and-white Guns N' Roses guitarist. The song's main riff is sometimes credited to Slash, others times to Bill Botrell, the white coproducer of the song. The rap was written by Botrell and performed, in various accounts, by either Botrell or black rapper L.T.B. In the video, the rap is lip-synced by white actor Macaulay Culkin, further muddying racial lines. Slash's presence indicates the possibility of Black Rock, particularly in that his first playing is indicted in the standard narrative of the "unruly" music to which "the kids these days" listen. And the circulating credit confusions suggest that, for many critics and casual Wikipedia writers, a black rocker or white rapper are both viable.

The challenge for this song, however, is that again Jackson is constructed as outside of the happy hyperracial union. His kinesthetic world tour relies on the theatrical display of racial, cultural, geographic, and even temporal difference for visual interest and narrative cohesion. And the emphasis on the dancers' brightly colored costumes and distinctive movement styles makes this difference tangible in a heightened fashion. At the same time, these distinctive traditions are placed back-to-back to emphasize their universality: while we do so in different ways, we all like to get down. This same interchangeability is captured in the final musical moments of the video, in which a cast of multiracial actors' heads morph into one another's while they lip-sync to the song's outro. This phenotypic fluidity confirms the universalist message. Yet the ability to transcend racial/cultural

boundaries also requires the visible—and often heightened—appearance of race in order to showcase this transcendence.

Jackson, though, is able to move freely between these groups, phenotypically ambiguous and able to perform all of their dances, channeling them through his personal vocabulary. His ability to flow between categories showcases the artifice of racial categories. And while the guitar/rap blend simplistically symbolizes interracial harmony, Jackson's underlying pop context stands in contrast as a true sonic vision of racial transcendence. The racial structures Jackson passes through remain, however, limiting the impact of his transracial abilities. Thus, in the video, the song ends and the camera pans to a black panther that exits the soundstage in a dark alley. The cat morphs into Jackson, and he performs a dance routine in which he smashes windows, simulates masturbation, and repeatedly yells/growls. Rather than end on a happy note, Jackson chose to punctuate the song with a vision of unresolved angst and the sense that interracial and multicultural happiness is a façade.

The response to this routine was quite poor, with critics questioning the purpose of the additional scene and viewers complaining about elements they found to be inappropriate (Pareles 9; Burnett and Deivert 19). To justify Jackson's destruction, graffiti of swastikas and various racial slurs was edited onto the windows in later versions of the full video. It thus became a more palatable antiracism that fueled Jackson's rage, rather than a vaguely defined anger. Jackson claimed he was just performing movements he considered panther like and apologized to his fans for acting in a way they found unseemly. While this statement could clearly have been motivated by a practical need to save face, what is striking is the way he jumped to proclaiming a nonhuman identity as the solution to the problem with his violent outburst. By editing in the racist epithets, Jackson's anger was confined and antiracism became the safer and more polite expression. The complex racial negotiation one hears in his music was obscured by a reactionary multiculturalism that denounced racism but not necessarily the broader racial—and racist—structure. The notion of transracial unity became hyperracial in itself, wielded as a static image rather than a living, hybrid practice.

After Jackson's death, numerous voices in the popular press touted his work as having shattered racial barriers, appealing to a range of consumers, and paving the way for other black artists into mainstream media outlets such as MTV. I believe, however, he was not transgressive by simply being a black musician who became widely popular but

in the more deep-rooted ways in which he unseated racial musical assumptions. Jackson challenged racial boundaries as a "pop" artist who continually negotiated the territory between performing and transcending race.

Long Live the King

In 2001, Destiny's Child released their smash single "Bootylicious," a song celebrating the hyperracial "thickness" of the singers' black female bodies. The trio's video for the song features costuming and choreography modeled on several of Jackson's videos, including his signature "fanning the crotch" flourish and fedora thrown to the side. What is most striking in light of this article, however, are the sonic resonances with Jackson's work. On their respective verses, Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland, and Michelle Williams sing in clipped, heavily glottal phrases. The track is supported by a funk-laden beat constructed out of highly processed drum samples. And the song features a prominent guitar sample from Stevie Nicks's "Edge of Seventeen" (1982), bringing the classic rock riff into a twenty-first century R&B context (Nicks also appears briefly in the opening moments of the song's video). In all, "Bootylicious" is a perfect example of the multiracial/cultural legacy of Jackson's pop kingdom, in which contemporary artists not only imagine a vast world of racialized sounds in their library but also weave them together with self-conscious acknowledgment of their juxtaposition. It is no wonder that, reportedly, Jackson appreciated the song, even singing the lyrics when he encountered Destiny's Child at an event ("Destiny's Child").

Jackson's sonic mash-up of the previous 30 years of popular music history resonates loud and clear in the contemporary pop artists of our time. His music transcends the racialized categories that drive the music industry, blending styles historically labeled black and white into an interracial formation. At the same time, his music features heightened and static images of race that serve as currency within the industry and foils to his hybrid base. The Jackson-influenced mainstream, then, is both progressive and regressive—and the conversation between these two political poles. Popular music is the culture this tension produces, pointing the path toward new ways of hearing race in the twenty-first century while providing the very tools to resist this transcendence. Michael Jackson held sway over this realm and experienced the results of these two extremes. How we now choose to remember his legacy will determine whether his music

is given the power to confirm what we think we know, or open our minds.

Notes

1. This piece began as a short paper for the symposium *Michael Jackson: Critical Reflection on a Life and a Phenomenon*, hosted by the Center for Race and Gender at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 2009. I extend my gratitude to Alisa Bierria for inviting me to participate, as well as Rashida Braggs, Brandi Catanese, Claudia Roberts, Elisha Roberts, Dez Roberts, and Tanya Saracho for their assistance in developing this article.

2. I make the terminological distinction here between "black" as a racial category and "African American" as cultural praxis. "Black music," then, is a racially constructed industry category that can overlap but does not equate with "African American music: Afro Asian Musical Politics," Northwestern University, 2009.

3. I discuss these ideas in significantly greater detail in my dissertation, "Musicking at the Crossroads of Diaspora."

4. These artists also called on other nonwhite traditions, but these, for the most part, were less holistically integrated and served more as explicit markers of racial/cultural difference. See Madonna's "La Isla Bonita" (1987), for example.

5. Let me be clear that I am talking about sound and the racialization of sound, not the integration of the larger structures of the music industry. As Garofalo notes, "Because of industry and audience racism, black personnel have been systematically excluded from positions of power within the industry and the audience has been artificially fragmented, in part along racial lines" (275). While there are many artists of color and traditions reflected in the industry, the racial stratification of power remains wholly out of proportion.

6. It is important to note that Prince was more successfully "being rock" at this same moment, presenting a musical profile quite distinct from Jackson's. Prince's music, however, was similarly consumed under the mainstream pop umbrella—rather than in purely rock contexts—and featured its own transracial blend of sources.

7. Jackson's standard rhetorical strategy was based on a conflation of his persona with the narrator of the song—indeed some of his songs were autobiographical. Thus, I refer here to Jackson as the speaker.

8. It is worth noting the US-centric (and racially limited) conflation that occurs in using these two musico-racial poles to stand for all of humanity.

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